

World of Warcraft: Do Quests Define the Experience?

An examination of World of Warcraft quests and their role in player motivation

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Introduction

When discussing the incredibly popular Massively Multiplier Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) video game genre, it is nearly impossible to ignore stereotypes that follow the players of these games. Typical assumptions of this gamer subculture involve both positive and negative associations, but generally all include players spending great amounts of time playing their games. This trend of belief, while based on presumptions, is not always untruthful. A study performed by Nicolas Ducheneaut et al. using more than 223,000 World of Warcraft (WoW) characters found that the average play time a week for those characters was 615 minutes per character. This amounts to thousands and thousands of hours a week, and this study accounted for only a small percentage of WoW's subscription base, which is currently at more than 8.3 million (Matulef).

So why do players spend so much time online on WoW? Many studies have attempted to analyze the motivations for people to start and continue to play. At the most basic level, Richard Bartle defined profiles that effected player motivation for Multi User Domains (MUDs). Based on observations about communication and overall player behavior, Bartle split the MUD players in his sample MUD into four categories: socializers, explorers, achievers and killers. These can easily be applied to WoW as well, encompassing the central activities and attitudes of most any player. Nick Yee expanded on the idea of Bartle's original categorization, showing that although

players tend to meet certain classification criteria, some players might fit into many groups rather than just one. Yee's categories for motivation were further expanded on in a study performed by Anders Tyachsen et al. on complex motivations to play digital role playing games. This study resulted in the creation of detailed subcategories of Yee's larger motivation classifications but ultimately strengthened the idea of complex player motivation.

From a psychological standpoint, a great deal of effort has gone into classifying why players play the games they do. In a study by Richard Coyne, the aspect of repetition in computer games was looked at from a psychological angle. Coyne assessed computer games' use of repetition as both a means to hook players into playing and also as a central feature of those games. Additionally, a study by Andrew Przybylski et al. indicated that the most engrossing videogames are those that feature a character that mirrors the player's ideal self. Players feel more positive emotions after playing a game if they inhabited a character similar to their ideal self-image. Studies like these indicate correlations between the design of video games and the psychological implications of those designs.

Regarding game development, there have been many studies regarding video game design and its effect on the player's interactions and feelings towards the game. Ying-Fu Lo and Ming-Hiu Wen outlined factors that can maximize an MMORPG's market success through a variety of design features. Out of nine general features, surveys indicated that the most important game constructs to gamers were character systems, virtual item cash shops, and environmental settings. The main appeal for gamers was their recreation of themselves in a vivid, virtual world. This idea is strengthened by Tanya Krzywinska's studies regarding concepts of "worldness" in WoW (386). Krzywinska defines the storyline and aesthetic aspects of WoW that contribute to creating a sense of a complete and detailed world. Through the intricate construction of mythic

structures, Azeroth creates a sense of grandeur that incentivizes players to play the game over and over again.

Although many studies have delved deep into the various motivations for gamers and the design of the games they play, rarely are the two aspects combined. It is important to remember that a game like WoW's culture is affected not just by its players but also by choices made by the developers of the game. Players are certainly inclined to play for reasons located in the real world but are just as influenced by a myriad of in-game constructs. These constructs may draw players to the game themselves or have a critical relationship to other inclinations gamers feel to play. In our study, we aim to observe both the layout of quests in WoW and their relationship to player motivations. We will discuss quests both in their relationship to other game constructs and in their most basic functions. By assessing the foundational tasks being assigned by the game, better understanding can be gained regarding the other complex motivations that bring players back to WoW.

Method

Our study was comprised of three methods to assess both quest structure and player response to this structure. Using results from both a broad survey and focused interviews, we studied player's behavior on WoW both generally and in relationship to quests. The third step was an observational study on the beginning quests of the game to have a better understanding of the mechanics of the beginner quests.

To develop a sense of the WoW community's opinions at large, we utilized survey responses from questions compiled from our peers. The survey questions were compiled by 45 students in a first-year writing and research course at the University of Denver (a private

university in the Western United States) to address a descriptive research question about the attitudes and practices of World of Warcraft players. The anonymous survey was administered through the Qualtrics application, and a link was posted on select internet forums and Twitter. The survey was kept active for 1 week and had 582 usable responses (excluded responses included those who reported under 18 years of age and respondents who did not complete the majority of the questionnaire).

A total of five WoW players were interviewed with questions based on both their typical actions and attitudes on WoW and their attitudes towards the completion of quests (see Appendix A). The goal of these interviews was to gauge the player's desire to complete quests and to observe the relationship between the completion of quests for a player and that player's other in game experiences. The players are members of our playing community and were selected based on their experience with the game. Three players are experienced with maximum leveled characters, one is less experienced with characters ranging from levels 30-40, and the third is inexperienced with all characters lower than level 10.

For our observation data, we used a new character and analyzed various aspects the early quest design. We picked a Night Elf Hunter because of the popularity of both the race and the class (US Realm Pop). We analyzed the quests in four different ways: who the quest was for, the rewards from the quest, the types of tasks the quests assigned, and how prevalent were cascading quests.

Results

Survey

We determined both the mean and standard deviation (using a 5-point Likert Scale conversion of survey responses) of the responses to the survey questions most applicable to our

study (see Appendix B). These questions included “After reaching the level cap, how do you spend your playing time,” “What motivates you to continue to play World of Warcraft,” and “When leveling a new character, how do you spend your time gaining experience.” The combined responses from these questions best synthesized players’ motivations to play and their intentions while playing.

For the results of the question “After reaching the level cap, how do you spend your time playing,” we noticed a clear trend of certain features being more prominently utilized than others. Players invested significantly less time on Roleplaying ($M = 1.388$, $SD = .806$) on average than any other activity. The highest ranked responses to the question were Raiding ($M = 3.552$, $SD = .992$) and Dailies/Instances ($M = 3.318$, $SD = 1.022$), both of which had twice the mean Likert score of Roleplaying.

The results of the question “What Motivates you to continue to play World of Warcraft” indicated that while Achievement (raiding, PvP) ($M = 4.034$, $SD = .974$), Immersion (questing, story and character development) ($M = 3.246$, $SD = 1.177$) and Socializing (friends, guilds) ($M = 3.683$, $SD = 1.077$) were all important sources of player motivation with mean Likert Scale ratings of over 3, Achievement had the highest overall rating.

To more accurately gauge the way end game content related to player motivations, we used Pearson Product Moment Correlations for end-game focus and player motivations (see table 1). The results indicated that while no correlations between content and motivation were particularly strong, there were notable differences between the motivations of players among the end game content groups. For example, players who selected a higher Likert score for Roleplaying were more likely to be motivated by Immersion than Achievement. Using the

differences in correlation we were able to assess the kinds of motivation that affected player desire to use different end game materials.

End Game Focus	Mean Likert Scale (1-5) Score	Standard Deviation	Correlation with motivation from Immersion	Correlation with motivation from Achievement	Correlation with motivation from Socializing
Arenas	2.2	1.31	-0.198	0.271	0.137
Battlegrounds	2.72	1.24	-0.067	0.187	0.131
Dailies	3.318	1.022	0.33	0.01	0.045
Dungeons/Instances	3.552	.992	0.292	-0.044	0.139
Creating/Leveling a new character	2.88	1.01	0.267	-0.213	-0.046
Roleplaying	1.388	.806	0.30	-0.105	0.134
Raiding	3.62	1.17	0.03	0.214	0.242

Table 1. Pearson Product Moment Correlations for End-game Focus and Motivation

In regards to responses to the question “When leveling a new character, how do you spend your time gaining experience,” Questing and Dungeons/Instances were the most popular responses, with average Likert scale ratings of 4.03 and 3.87 respectively. PvP and Grinding were less prominent, with average scoring of 2.21 and 1.99.

In addition to the three questions prior, we also analyzed the results of the question “When you are questing, how do you usually respond to the quest description.” From these results we found that only 4.4% ($n = 26$) of the WoW players surveyed ($N = 582$) always read

the complete quest descriptions on every play through. Other players responded that they read the description all the way through only once, or that they only skimmed descriptions until their assigned task was understood.

Initial Quest Observations

Out of 36 quests we performed with our test character we found that a majority ($n = 23$) of the quests stemmed from another quest that was previously done. Most of the quests done were discovered because previous quests lead player there (see table 2).

Cascading	Non-Cascading
63.8%	36.1%

Table 2. Linear Quest Assignment

We first recorded whether an individual NPC, a group or a faction assigned us quests.. We found that individual quests were more prevalent based on the data. Fifty-eight point three percent ($n = 22$) of the quests done were for an individual NPC. There was also a distinct lack of faction assigned quests amongst the starter quests (see table 3).

Individual	Group	Faction
58.3%	38.8%	2.7%

Table 3. Categories of Quest Assigners

Regarding the rewards given upon quest completion, we noted that one was always given experience after a quest; completion never gave just money or items. In addition, we saw that the most common quest reward was a mix of money and experience, being given in 19.4% of

beginning quests ($n = 7$) (see table 4). The least common reward set up was items and experience with only 5.5% of the quests ($n = 2$).

Experience	Items, Experience	Money, Experience	Items, Money, Experience
19.4%	5.5%	41.6%	33.3%

Table 4. Categories of Beginning Quest Reward

Our final observations were regarding the nature of the quest errand. This included gathering, killing, delivering, looting, finding someone to speak with, and any combination of the five. The most commonly assigned tasks involved killing ($n = 9$) and delivery ($n = 9$), which were equally prevalent among starting quests. The least common single purpose quest was looting creatures with only 8.3% of quests ($n = 3$). Combination quests (quests with two main focuses) consisted primarily of quests where the player was tasked to kill and gather ($n = 1$) and quests where the player killed, gathered and looted ($n = 2$) (see table 5).

Gather	Killing	Delivery	Looting Creatures	Find and Speak	Gathering, Killing	Killing, Loot Creatures
16.6%	25%	25%	8.3%	16.6%	2.7%	5.5%

Table 5. Categories of tasks given in beginning quests

Interviews

While sorting our interview data, we used Nick Yee's categories for player motivation as a guide for observation. We saw that for each player, certain aspects of quests were related to either motivations themselves or game constructs related to motivations. For example, one of our respondents, interviewee 3, replied,

Both the Draeni and Death Knight starter quests were created mainly to help old players find out about changes to the world after expansions. Therefore they are

able to have more unorthodox quest lines and have certain scripting that makes them very different and much more captivating.

Here, interviewee 3 discusses a positive instance of his experience with quests. In his description of why he enjoyed the Draeni and Death Knight starter quests, he focuses on the setting and plots of the quests. This interest on in-game discovery falls into the sub-category Discovery of Immersion for player motivation (Yee). Overall, there were many different responses from the players that touched on quest's involvement in all forms of motivation. Respondents also commented on the necessity of quests in order to level up. Interviewee 2, a high leveled player, remarked on quests, "You have to do them because that's the way the game is set up." Similarly, Interviewee 1 commented, "Quests are still important, mixing dungeons with red quests is best."

Although all respondents used quests as a tool to gain experience, none actively played WoW with the focus of completing quests. Each high level respondent mentioned other end-game content that they utilized, and although interviewee 1 identified daily quests as an activity he sometimes uses, these quests are important only to fund his true outlet, raids. The two lower level respondents completed quests frequently, but were not interested in the quest lines themselves. Interviewee 4 enjoyed the social aspect of completing tasks with a friend more than the quests themselves. In regards to his most enjoyable WoW experiences, he replied "I convinced a good friend to try it out... we did starter quests together." Interviewee 5 was the newest player and did not seem to like WoW altogether. She "envisioned quests as an epic journey," when in game she "was killing crabs, a time waster."

The third trend we noticed in quests was their usefulness as an introductory tool to WoW. Regardless of the player's like or dislike for quests, the interviewees agreed that there was

educational merit in the early quests. Interviewee 3, who has a great fondness for quests, remarked, “Starter quests were helpful in learning the basic mechanics of the game. (i.e health and mana/rage/energy/rp consumption and use),” while interviewee 5, an inexperienced player, agreed “I think they helped me in terms of learning controls or different commands and stuff...”

Discussion

From the collected data, certain trends regarding quest’s function in WoW can be deciphered. Our interviews indicate that although players regularly complete quests, they rarely play the game with this action as a primary motivation. Although Dailies had the second highest Likert Scale response ($M = 3.318$, $SD = 1.022$), some players use these repeatable quests in order to gain wealth for other aspects of the game. Only four percent of survey respondents to “When you are questing, how do you usually respond to the quest description” replied that they read the entire quest every play through, indicating that most players aren’t interested in the situations presented in the quest and are more interested in having a task at hand. Their continued motivation must come from other game sources.

Interview responses showed that quests can have influence on all three aspects of player motivation. For those who game to achieve, quests can be used to level up a character, which was shown to be a common occurrence on the administered survey. For Socializers, quests can provide game content while the player interacts with his/her community.

For those motivated by Immersion, quests become a much more interesting feature. Typically, Immersion might include story lines and in-game fantasy content which are held to a great extent in quests. Our interview responses indicate that players find quest’s story lines both interesting and boring. Interviewee 3 felt captivated by certain quest plots and enjoyed the

completion of quests (although their primary motivations appeared to be socializing and achievement in raids) but stated “in the beginning i wanted to complete the quests and learn but once i had done it once it sometimes seemed silly to be completing the same quests over and over again.” The other interviewees seemed less enthralled about the actual reasons they were completing their tasks. In relationship to the purpose of quests in game, interviewee 2 replied “they are a means to an end, [they’re] not pivotal.” The survey results mirrored interview responses, showing that almost half of players surveyed ($n = 387$) weren’t concerned with the scenarios of the quests and were mostly concerned with receiving a task.

The primary role of quests in WoW seems to be as a fixture around which other aspects of the game move. Besides just leveling characters, quests can serve an important role as an educational tool for the game. All interviewees indicated that quests were useful for learning the game’s controls. While learning the game was not any single player’s motivation for playing WoW, the captivating end game content could not have been realized without early quests.

On the topic of early quests, we noticed that although the game presents players with a variety of quest scenarios, these scenarios were never mentioned as any motivation to complete quests but were praised in regards to their writing and character development. Cascading quest line structure proved interesting as well and was confirmed by players to be a driving force in completing early quests. Respondents indicated that without higher level characters to take them to new quests, they were stuck completing cascading quest lines. Interviewee 2 remarked about the ability to explore early in the game, “if you don’t know anything about WoW you’re totally bound to [early quests].” This grand trail of tasks added a more guided element for players to experience the game, but did not seem to use any of Yee’s categories of motivation other than Achieving, in that players might look to complete all quests in game. This motivation did not

influence our interviewees, although interviewee 1 mentioned the achievement (but also that he would not try for it as it would be “mind numbingly boring”).

Limitations

Although our interviews captured the feelings of many different kinds of players, none of our interviewees claimed to be interested in roleplaying. As indicated by table 1, players who are interested in roleplaying are some of the most motivated by immersion. It might be that interviewees engrossed by roleplaying would attest to the immersive value of quest storylines and scenarios.

In our observations, we focused only on the initial quest lines in the game. There is a chance that those quest structures aren't representative of others later in the game, and that later, unknown structures are a driving force of player motivation. An intriguing extension of this study would be a look at the complete quest lines throughout WoW

Conclusion

Our look into quest structure and player motivation is just a peek into the vast structure of WoW and that form's effect on its culture of gamers. Further research could provide important insights on additional aspects of video game design and its ramifications on the gamers that play it. Game cultures cannot be observed in a vacuum; there are many layers of influence that must be peeled away before community feelings can be more accurately synthesized. Our study has only begun to detect attitudes and motivations triggered by the most basic design of Azeroth and World of Warcraft.

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“Appendix A”

Interview Questions:

- 1) When actively playing WoW, approximately how many hours did you play a weeks?
- 2) How many characters did you actively play as? What levels and races were they? Why did you choose your character layouts?
- 3) Did/do you focus on multiple characters or just one? Why?
- 4) What is your most memorable moment playing WoW?
- 5) Why did you start playing WoW? Were you immediately hooked? If so, what was so captivating about the game?
- 6) How would you start a new character? How would quests play a part of leveling that character up?
- 7) Would you tell me about a quest you remember particularly well?
- 8) Would you tell me about a quest that was useful for learning about the game?
- 9) What do you enjoy, if anything about completing quests. What do you dislike?
- 10) Do you feel that the early game forces you to remain on a certain path? Do you feel able to explore? Why?
- 11) Has your attitude about completing quests changed over time?
- 12) How would you recommend WoW to a friend?

“Appendix B”

Survey Questions used:

“After reaching the level cap, how do you spend your playing time?”

Arenas 1 2 3 4 5

Battlegrounds 1 2 3 4 5

Dailies 1 2 3 4 5

Dungeons/Instances 1 2 3 4 5

Create/leveling a new character 1 2 3 4 5

Role-playing 1 2 3 4 5

Raiding 1 2 3 4 5

“What motivates you to continue to play World of Warcraft?”

Achievement (raiding, conquest, PvP) 1 2 3 4 5

Immersion (questing, story, character development) 1 2 3 4 5

Socialization (friends, guilds) 1 2 3 4 5

“When leveling or starting a new character, how do you spend your time gaining experience?”

Questing 1 2 3 4 5

Grinding 1 2 3 4 5

Dungeons/Instances 1 2 3 4 5

PvPing 1 2 3 4 5